Lee Ann Womack

I Hope You Dance

"I hope you never fear those mountains in the distance
Never settle for the path of least resistance
Living life means taking chances but they're worth taking
Lovin' might be a mistake, but it's worth making
Don't let some hellbent heart leave you bitter
When you come close to selling out, reconsider..."

"Just over a year ago, Decca closed," says Lee Ann Womack, trying to define her place in the world and the path that brought her to *I Hope You Dance*. "I took that as a sign to regroup. I had a new label and I was finding my way there. I'd had a child unexpectedly. I was sorting out all kinds of things...and I wanted to take the time to get it right."

With *I Hope You Dance*, the pride of Jacksonville, Texas delivers an album that may be the first truly great album of the new century. Drawing on a broad spectrum of Nashville's finest songwriters - Rodney Crowell, Don Schlitz, Bobbi Cryner, Buddy and Julie Miller, Bruce Robison, Ronnie Bowman - and some of the most interesting guest musicians - Ricky Skaggs, Sons of the Desert, guitarist Kenny Greenberg, Kevin Montgomery, the Lonesome River Band, Jon Randall and Buddy and Julie Miller again - Womack's album plumbs the loneliness, happiness and hope that resonates through our lives.

And it's anchored by Mark D. Sanders and Tia Sillers' "I Hope You Dance," a breathtaking offering of the things we hope for the people we love the most. Swelling strings and a contrapuntal chorus, courtesy of fellow Texans Sons of the Desert, define "I Hope You Dance." Already being hailed as "a career record. Her sweet vulnerable voice perfectly captures the tender sentiment of the lyric" by *Billboard* and "Lee Ann's vocal is a thing of crystal beauty... Nashville at its most poetic and profound" by *Music Row*, this is a universal moment where the best in everyone rises then soars.

"When I heard that song, I knew I'd made the right choices about my life," Womack says. "I was in the studio and I took a copy and sat in my car, listening to it over and over. For me, it reminded me of my girls and everything I wanted for them. But it was also a new beginning in my career with a new song, a new record and a new label...and in my personal life, there was my new husband, my new daughter and a new life.

"The thing about 'I Hope You Dance,' though, is it can be so many things to so many different people. Certainly it can be everything a parent hopes for their child, but it also can be for a relationship that's ending as a fond wish for the other person's happiness. It can be for someone graduating from school or embarking on some new path...It fits almost every circumstance I can think of."

That essence of hope permeates *I Hope You Dance*. Lee Ann Womack, with the sparkling voice and the heart that breaks in every note, spent almost two years making her third album and MCA Nashville debut. For the Grammy-, CMA- and ACM-nominated singer, this was not only about throwing her arms wide open to the tides of human experience, it was the opportunity to embrace the diverse strands of country.

"To me, this album has more of an edge in two different directions," the diminutive Texan explains. "I've always had a mix of real traditional and real bluegrassy things, but there's also always been very contemporary stuff. This time, I wanted to push both sides further out - and see just how far country music can go and still be country music."

Womack's explorations cover a lot of ground. Whether it's the aching bluegrass of the unmending heart in Ronnie Bowman's "The Healing Kind," which features the lighter-than-air harmony vocals of Ricky Skaggs, the tormented obsession of Buddy and Julie Miller's scorched Appalachian meltdown "Does My Ring Burn Your Finger," the rollicking Buck Owens' flavored honky tonk of Womack's own "Feel Like I'm Forgetting Something" or the syncopated roots funk of Rodney Crowell's hit-and-run-over "Ashes By Now," Womack weaves a spell that is honest and strong yet fragile in its willingness to surrender and be swept up in the emotions she embraces.

"It's not always something I've personally been through," Womack admits. "But I try to stick with feelings I know. Maybe I've not been through that exact thing, but I have enough compassion and life experience, that I try

to find things I can put myself into."

"A singer's job is to interpret the lyric - and that's a lot more than just getting the melody and the pitch. You want to be able to sing a song and have people watch and feel like there's dimension to whatever you're singing about...If they sense a reality to the experience, it draws them in. You're striving to bring people into the moment, to get 'em to feel it, too. Tony Bennett's the master of that."

That will to connect comes from a very real place. Her father balanced his work as the high school principal with being a disc jockey at the local country station, so Womack was exposed to country's physical power at an early age.

"I remember as a child, still to this day, what it felt like to hear twin fiddles. It's not just audible, you feel it. It's like when you hear something that really swings - not just a swing song - but a song played that truly swings, it gets inside you.

"And when the other kids were getting into rock and stuff, I was always listening to country. 'Today My World Slipped Away' - the first time I heard it, I remember walking through the hallway in school with my walkman on and just being transported when Vern Gosdin sang, 'I left the courtroom, went straight to church/ When I hit my knees, told God how much it hurt'...I had no idea what he singing about, but I knew how bad that pain was."

Her first concert was in junior high school. Womack accompanied her father to the Lufkin Civic Center to see Conway Twitty - and her fate was sealed. "I remember he came out and said, 'Hello darling...' That just killed me."

Still a small town in Texas is a long way from Music City - and Womack's dream was a hard thing for people to sometimes grasp. "You know how all kids are gonna grow up and be something almost unattainable? They want to be a ballerina or an actress. Well, I was gonna come to Nashville and be a country star; I never grew out of it. My friends' parents probably worried about me, but that's okay."

"After all, why does a little girl want to hear 'Gentle On My Mind,' 'Wichita Lineman,' 'If You're Gonna Do Me Wrong (Do It Right)'? I didn't know anything about that kind of stuff...I had the most perfect life. My parents got along, we lived in a classic house."

" But I was always this sad little girl," she laughs at the recollection. "I was just kinda blue about the fact that we lived in such a small town - being so far from the music business. I spent years moping around Jacksonville, Texas. I'd sit at the piano and make up sad little melodies and cry."

Little girls, though, become big girls - and big girls chase their dreams if they have the courage and the conviction. Encouraged by her parents ("They always told me I could do whatever I wanted, and I believed them. What was the worst thing that could happen?"), Womack set her sites on Nashville. But even in the proximity of the country music business, she still found herself on the outside looking in.

Womack was married to musician/singer Jason Sellers, who quickly found work first with Vince Gill, then Ricky Skaggs. She was left at home with a newborn baby and the pieces of her dream. "He was seeing the world...literally calling me from Egypt, and I was at home, changing diapers," she laments.

Like Tammy Wynette before her, Womack packed up her child and continued chasing her destiny. "I was trying to get demo work and couldn't afford a baby sitter. So I'd put Aubrie in her stroller. I'd push her up and down Music Row, dropping off tapes, hoping someone would notice."

Though those odds would topple most, not the woman Country Music hails as the heir apparent to Dolly Parton. "I've never been one to give up. If I feel the pressure, if I feel backed against the wall, I just work harder. I've always believed hard work and good music wins out if you stay with it."

With songs like "Never Again Again," "The Fool," "A Little Past Little Rock," "I'll Think of a Reason Later" and "Now You See Me, Now You Don't," Womack began forging a very modern take on the country she loved. Steeped in all the elements of traditional music, there was something pristine, yet aggressive about her kind of country - and that freshness echoes in her latest.

"Stronger Than I Am," Bobbie Cryner's aching Wynette-esque ballad that balances a struggling divorcee's faltering resolve with the development of her toddler, catches in the throat, while "Lonely, Too," Bruce Robison's twin-fiddle-steeped waltz of mourning, resonates with the emptiness of the abandoned as does Julie Miller's lush "I Know Why The River Runs." Still hope is prominent, too, on Womack's lean bluegrass reprise of Don Williams' #1 "Lord I Hope This Day Is Good" and the real life romantic trajectory of Don Schlitz's hushed "Why They Call It Falling."

Finding the emotional center and expanding from there is what makes Womack a stylist to be reckoned with. But it's the desire to match her vocal performances with the strongest possible arrangements that gives *I Hope You*

Dance its luster.

"I think we were able to bring this up a level from the other records," Womack says happily. "I was able to spend the time and really think about this stuff. The musicians who contributed, what they brought in terms of playing was amazing. I wanted to make sure we got the right players for each song. I wanted to try different things, explore what each song is about and needed."

"The fact that we have Kenny Greenberg on one song, and Brent Mason, then my own guitarist Joe Manuel on another makes for a very different sound. I even got to use an electric and acoustic bass on one song. I'd heard Ricky Skaggs do that, and it was something I always wanted to do."

Finding fulfillment in her music is only one part of what makes Lee Ann Womack who she is. Wife. Mother of two. Modern woman. Working hard. Having it all. It's a great big world, but it all comes down to a clear sense of who one is and well-thought-out personal priorities.

"I refuse to put my career before the really important things," Womack says without apology. "I think if you live your life, build something that matters to you, it invests your music with experience. There's no substitute for that. So I believe in the end, I'll end up further ahead."

"I don't like shallow. I don't like listening to someone sing who's shallow, just like I don't care to talk to someone who's shallow because there's just nothing there. Find someone who's lived, who's felt things - they'll be the one who'll take you places and broaden your view."

"I look down the road and I don't just want to do what's best for today. It's about what's best for the future, what's best for a lifetime, not necessarily best for the moment. If you want something that's going to last - whether it's music or your family - you have to think that way. If you can do that, then I think you're gonna have something people will recognize their own hopes and dreams in, and that's where you forge the kind of connections I'm the most interested in."

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